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## **Book Reviews**

**CHRISTINA FINK.** *Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule.* London. Zed Books. 2001. Notes. Bibliography. Index. ISBN 185649-926 (softcover).

The study of Burmese politics and social life has traditionally been shrouded under a veil of secrecy. As a result of tight state control on government data and strict censorship laws, Burmese studies have been largely inaccessible to scholars outside Burma. Christina Fink's first book on the daily struggles of Burmese under the military regime is indeed a welcome new addition to the limited number of books on contemporary Burmese politics. A key purpose in Fink's book was to reveal the reasons for the longevity of the military regime in Burma. Besides examining the various strategies of control exercised by the military regime to remain in power, Fink has also shown how the people of Burma have participated in prolonging military rule by fostering the culture of fear in their 'silence'. In the words of Aung San Suu Kyi, Fink's book is "particularly valuable for its study of the psychological effects of military rule". The portrayal of the Burmese society through interviews with a wide variety of people; including monks, student activists, political prisoners, soldiers and artists offer a new perspective on the "specifics of life under military rule in Burma" (p.7). Bringing together more than 150 interviews conducted over a period of five years (1995 –1999), Fink's book has helped 'break' the silence by lending voice to a large majority of Burmese who are living under the fear of punishment and retribution under the present military dictatorship.

There are thirteen chapters in the book. Chapters One to Four were most well written as they presented clear and concise overview of the historical legacies of the Burmese military (Tatmadaw). The detailed account showed how the military assumed political power in 1962 and traced the quick expansion and consolidation of the armed forces. Similar to Burmese historian Mary Callahan's view, Fink argued that democracy has "superficial roots in Burma and the military took over with little resistance" (p. 30). Coercive techniques such as intimidation, imprisonment and constant surveillance by intelligence agents were seen as effective means to keep pro-democracy and opposition forces at bay. With the use of 'divide and conquer' strategy and mixed tactic such as 'Four Cuts' policy, depopulation of ethnic minority areas, ceasefire agreements and promises of lucrative economic opportunities, the Tatmadaw was portrayed as successful especially in the recent years in fending off threats of secessionism from armed ethnic minority groups. In recounting the days under General Ne Win's rule (1962 –1988) many bizarre anecdotes were cited to illustrate the influences of religion and superstitious beliefs on politics. For example, the ordering of the cars to be driven on the right instead of the left because of fears of political attack from the right was one of Ne Win's many irrational policies (p. 40). Despite Ne Win's strong authoritarian legacies, Fink noted a rise in the uncoordinated pro-democratic actions in different sectors of society. With the emergence of civil society and spontaneous civil disobedience in the 1980s, Fink was pointed in assessing the reasons for the failure of 1988 demonstrations to overthrow the Tatmadaw (pp 62-63). Besides, the author was also critical of the lack of united response from the international community (p. 231), which in her view, encouraged and prolonged the military rule.

Chapters Five to Eleven exhaustively detailed the various forms of sufferings of the Burmese under the military regime. In these chapters, Fink demonstrated the

"totalitarian nature of the state's intrusion into virtually every aspect of people's lives" (p. 138) such as in the family, community, religion, and education. By portraying the suffering and deplorable living human condition in Burma, the book was successful in revealing the dilemmas faced by the Burmese everyday - either resigned to live under military oppression or faced persecution for speaking out against the regime. In Burma, the high energy from 1988 and 1989-1990 demonstrations were seen to dissipate in the face of growing military dominance. According to Fink, pragmatism and struggle for survival quickly replaced ideological aspirations for democracy. While Fink tried to show the different forms of resistance on the ground such as the formation of study groups, circulation of 'floating books' (pp 183-184) and whispers of politics in teashops and bathrooms, one gets the impression that the Burmese "were so busy hustling to survive that they had no time for politics" (p. 136).

Academic scholars on Burmese politics such as Andrew Selth and Robert Taylor have generally adopted a Statist approach in analyzing the longevity and impact of the Burmese armed forces. Fink's anthropological approach in "Living Silence" is refreshingly different as it illuminates the importance and subjectivity of the human agency. The voices of the oppressed Burmese came through in her writing and set this book apart from the others in the similar field. However, the author's strength in uncovering the "lived" experiences of the oppressed is also ironically, a weakness in the book. The emphasis on interviewees who harbour mostly anti-military sentiments reflected Fink's partiality and has skewed the objectivity of the book somewhat. The focus on the sufferings of the selected sectors of people such as former political prisoners, dissidents and pro-democratic activists omits representation of Burmese who are supportive or ambivalent of the military regime. In Chapter Seven, the author painstakingly examined the tensions between intelligence and military officers and the mistreatment of the foot soldiers by military commanders (p. 144). However, if indeed there was a growing number of desertions (p. 155) and dissatisfaction within the lower ranking officers, a key question of why the military regime is still united today remains unanswered. Despite the reported grievances and increased 'brutality' (p. 154), what exactly is the military regime doing right to stay in power? Why hasn't a Ramos of Philippines showed up in Burma (p. 251)? Perhaps, a more balanced and nuanced perspective could be presented if the views of farmers, civil servants, ethnic minorities, military officers or supporters of the military regime were also incorporated in the analysis.

In the later chapters, Fink's writing was clearly sympathetic towards Aung San Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) political agenda. At times, the book sounded almost like an NLD mouthpiece, which again raises doubts on the objectivity of the interviewees and sources quoted. Coincidentally, in Chapters Eight to Ten, Fink's literary style reminds this reviewer of Aung San Suu Kyi's writing in "Letters from Burma" as both adopt the similar usage of indigenous poetic analogies and emotive narratives.

"Living silence" has showcased the author's extensive library research capabilities, admirable intellectual tenacity and courage in the writing of a book on a little understood and closed-up society. As Fink appropriately observed on the prospect of democracy in Burma, the "battle to shift the power of balance is a psychological one" (p. 231). Indeed, what elements have to be in place in Burma before the people would 'shake off their fear and act' (p. 231) for their own freedom? In spite of the occasional inclination towards anti-government rhetoric, Fink's book has certainly increased our knowledge on the current state of affairs in Burma and is a recommended read for

anyone interested in the hearts and minds of the people who have lived or still living under the Burmese military regime.

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**ROBERT I. ROTBERG** (Ed): *Burma - Prospects for a Democratic Future*. Washington D. C., Brookings Institution Press. 1998, pp.308.

Democracy in Burma is a highly pertinent issue - yet, viewed in the light of recent developments, democracy seems a distant utopia. The book, belatedly reviewed here, is a valuable contribution and is recommended reading at this time of multiple road maps for democratic development in Burma. However, Khin Nyunt's pledge to reinvigorate the national convention and future referendum and election hardly means that the military will relinquish power, according to the Burma scholars who have contributed to this book. Those looking for an internal split in the regime will learn from this volume that the army is a corporate unit in terms of power, economic control and welfare for its personal, their relatives and a deeply rooted patron-client network. Thus, a split under the enforced sanctions seems unlikely.

Several important questions are raised, directly or indirectly, in this book, such as was the democratic period from 1947 to 1962 real democracy? Federalism was merely nominal; and how are the ethnic minority included in a democratic constitution? Is the NLD prepared for democracy with a leadership mainly consisting of generals dismissed from the army?

Several contributions, in particular those by David Steinberg, Robert Taylor and Mary Callahan demonstrate that the military regime maintains its role as the sole provider and guardian of unity, protector against internal fragmentation as well as against external influence and intervention. The historical legitimacy of the regime is founded on the role of the military in the counter insurgency wars against the communist and ethnic insurrections since 1948 and the ousting of U Nu's government and parliamentary rule, a rule they saw as flawed by factionalism and erratic persons.

It is important, as the book does, to analyse and understand the rationale of the military and its leaders in anticipation of an eventual dialogue. The regime's worldview is totally dominated by a xenophobic nationalism: "The SLORC (now SPDC) continuously has denigrated foreign individuals, cultures and lifestyles in the press [...] its assumption [is] that there is a disconnect between patriotism and patrimony", writes Steinberg (p.271). This worldview inhibits the analysis of realities and of reforms and it seems unlikely that the military will relinquish power completely.

Legitimacy, Taylor says, is thus based on a self-fulfilling prophecy that the army is the only cohesive force, a legitimacy, which it founded on their historical interpretation. The army saved the Union of Burma from disintegration during the multiple rebellions since independence and again in 1962 when Shan and Kayah were on the verge of leaving the Union. The army will also argue that it has secured cease-fires with several ethnic organizations. However, ethnic differences have become synonymous with enemies and Burmese soldiers have been indoctrinated into thinking that they are in hostile territory and among hostile populations, according to Ananda Raja, when they operate in minority areas.

The military concept of legitimacy is based on a corporate ideology, integrating public and individual interests into a unitary state ruled by the military and based on total surveillance. The result has been to deny the legitimacy of any source of power - social, economic, cultural, religious- outside the organizations controlled by the military, according to Taylor. Thus, individual identity is subsumed under one national identity defined by the military. Further, the book describes power and authority as based on personal qualities and relations. This traditionally based conception of power generates personal conflicts and factionalism. The military may have an advantage here with its corporative unity.

The military as well as the NLD have appealed to traditional Burmese values, in particular to Buddhism. The military considers itself to be the main defender of Burmese culture, and this model of a unitary Myanmar culture is problematic in a country with a high ethnic diversity (about 30% of the population belong to ethnic minorities). Thus, Josef Silverstein, in his assessment of a national political culture, concludes that "there never was a singular political culture shared by Burmans and non-Burmans. Instead, the culture has been plural, drawing on different sources and seeking different ends".

No real independent NGO exist and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and its (about) five million members is a mass organization controlled by the military and seen as a counter weight against the National League for Democracy and Daw Aung san Suu Kyi. Thus, a civil society does not exist, a clear disadvantage if a democratization is to succeed in the future.

The political culture has had a deep impact upon education, health, control of drugs and last but not least on the economic situation. In his contribution, John Brandon writes, that while perhaps 40-50% of the total state expenditure goes to the military, a mere 25% goes to health and education. Only 25% of school children complete primary education; universities have been closed for long periods and are now more or less reduced to a system of distant learning in order to control the students' political activities. Whilst national literacy rate is 80%, the rate in minority areas is only 50-65%. The grave health and nutrition situation (David Chandler) further inhibits a future democratization as does the deteriorating economy. The booming drug trade (Robert Gelbhard and Bertil Lintner) is another negative indicator. It has created serious diplomatic problems with Thailand and warlordism, probably involving the military. Such forces could also inhibit democratization. Bertil Lintner enumerates at least four drug armies. Money from the drug trade is invested in real estate, hotels and factories and form a significant part of country's economy. Lintner estimates that the export of opiates is equal to all legal exports.

Marin Ott examines Burma's international relations, especially China's presence in Northern Burma and its economic and political influence. China is "the Myanmar peoples most trusted friend" in the words of General Than Shwe, the regime's strongman. China has helped modernize and expand the armed forces of Burma to 3-400.000 men, according to Andrew Selth.

The military completely controls Burmese society. The means used are a mixture of privileges, jobs, and business opportunities for active and retired personal and relatives, controlled by the Defence Services Institute, as well as a total surveillance by the Division of Defence Intelligence. The leadership has close personal ties and all these aspects are important in the corporate functioning of the regime.

Did Burma ever experience democracy? Mary Callahan writes the "democratic era" in brackets and points to the ambivalence in the 1947 constitution where socialist/national and state control were more important than individual rights. Callahan demonstrates how personal struggles and factions within the AFPFL as well as U Nu's invocation of emergency provisions had a serious impact upon the development of democracy. She concludes that the 1950s do not hold solutions for Burma's future - on the contrary, that period should be a sobering warning about the historical roots of the present problems. Taylor adds that participation in elections until the last in 1960 were low.

In all, the contributors to this book seem very sceptical about the democratic potential in Burmese society. According to Steinberg, the situation is further aggravated by the sanctions, which he finds ineffective. This description is, sadly, supported by substantial evidence. But are the contributors too pessimistic? Is the Burmese population not capable of entering a road towards democracy despite the long years of autocratic rule? The book does not give any solutions but pertinently demonstrates why the international community should engage much more and mediate in the process towards a dialogue and reconciliation. The recent sanctions by the USA have closed several textile factories and the humanitarian crisis is deepening day by day. Can any road map toward democracy work in a population as subdued by the many plagues and troubles as the peoples of Burma analysed in this valuable volume?

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**GUSTAAF HOUTMAN.** *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy.* Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Foreign Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa. 1999. Appendices. Bibliography. ISBN 4-87298-748-3.

Never mind the state, what matters is the state of mind. This, in short, can be taken as the message of the book. It tries to analyze the political situation in Burma with anthropological methods, thereby translating western terminology into a Burmese idiom. Burmese Buddhism transcends not only daily life and politics, but also the minds of every person in this country, shaping everybody's behavior and thinking, and is thus inseparably woven into all aspects of life. Politics in Burma, it thus appears, is not just a struggle for power and authority in the public sphere, but also a competition between mental constitutions.

The book consists of two parts, each divided into several chapters. The first part is sufficiently summarized by its title "Myanmaification – Imprisoning Burma". The term "Myanmaification" is used to describe the extensive attempts of the SLORC/SPDC governments to bring every aspect of public life under their control, while the second part of the title reflects the author's view of this process.

The second part puts the SLORC's major opponent, Aung San Suu Kyi, in the foreground, stating that "Mental Culture Transcends Prison". Buddhism, it is shown, has always retained a certain degree of independence, withstanding attempts of the SLORC to model it according to their needs, because popular belief in mental power (we might call that charisma in western idiom) gives Aung San Suu Kyi a weapon to resist the generals. Providing moreover a common platform, Buddhism could also show the way out of the political deadlock, as the last chapter (the book has no conclusion as such), dealing with a *sayadaw* equally revered by "the Lady" and the generals, cautiously indicates.

On the whole, the book provides no easy read. The typesetting would have required a magnifier being sold along with the book, and the patience of those readers unfamiliar with Burmese life and letters (Burmese script is regularly employed in both text and footnotes) may be overstressed rather soon. In addition, the book's overly long passages appear to be highly disorganized. The title of chapter 4, for example, announces the "Four Attributes of Disciplined Democracy", but there are five sub-headings (in bold larger typesetting) dealing with "Law, Myanma Culture, Culture and the Generals, Modernization and Business, and GONGOs" (i.e. Government-organized NGOs). The text under this last sub-heading moreover states that GONGOs are "the SPDC's second qualifier for democracy" (p. 113). In another instance, Japanese development aid is dealt with under the heading "Illegalising Contestant Culture". Thorough lecturing would also have helped to eliminate the frequent misspellings; and given the amount of information packed into the book, an index should have proven indispensable.

Putting these shortcomings aside, the book displays a remarkable familiarity with Burmese life and customs, stemming from thorough fieldwork combined with a wide range of textual sources, while at the same time it offers an approach to Burmese politics completely different from the ones we usually get to read.

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